

## WHAT IS ATSDR?

ATSDR is the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a federal public health agency. ATSDR is part of the Public Health Service in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ATSDR is not a regulatory agency like the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Created by Superfund legislation in 1980, ATSDR's mission is to prevent exposure and adverse human health effects and diminished quality of life associated with exposure to hazardous substances from waste sites, unplanned releases, and other sources of pollution present in the environment. Through its programs—including surveillance, registries, health studies, environmental health education, and applied substance-specific research—and by working with other federal, state, and local government agencies, ATSDR acts to protect public health.

## WHAT IS A PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT?

An ATSDR Public Health Assessment is not the same thing as a medical exam or a community health study. It can sometimes lead to those things, as well as to other public health activities. ATSDR conducts a Public Health Assessment for every site on or proposed for the National Priorities List (also known as the Superfund list). ATSDR can also be petitioned to conduct a Public Health Assessment for other sites.

A Public Health Assessment reviews information about hazardous substances at a site and evaluates whether exposure to those substances might cause any harm to people. Public Health Assessments consider—

- what the levels (or “concentrations”) of hazardous substances are

- whether people might be exposed to contamination and how (through “exposure pathways” such as breathing air, drinking or contacting water, contacting or eating soil, or eating food)
- what harm the substances might cause to people (or the contaminants’ “toxicity”)
- whether working or living nearby might affect people’s health
- other dangers to people, such as unsafe buildings, abandoned mine shafts, or other physical hazards

To make those determinations, ATSDR looks at three primary sources of information—

- *environmental data*, such as information available on the contaminants and how people could come in contact with them
- *health data*, including available information on communitywide rates of illness, disease, and death compared with national and state rates
- *community concerns*, such as reports from the public about how the site affects their health or quality of life

## HOW CAN I PETITION FOR A PUBLIC HEALTH ASSESSMENT?

The petition process is very simple. All you have to do is write to:

Assistant Administrator, ATSDR (CHB)  
1600 Clifton Road, NE (E28)  
Atlanta, GA 30333

In your letter, you must include the following information:

- ❑ your name, address, and phone number
- ❑ the name of the group you represent, if any
- ❑ the name, location, and description of the facility or release
- ❑ information you have about people's exposure to a toxic substance
- ❑ a request that ATSDR perform a Public Health Assessment

This information is also helpful to ATSDR, but not required:

- ❑ any other information you can provide about the facility or release—such as the chemical you are concerned about, the amount in the environment now or in the past, or the parties you believe may be responsible
- ❑ exposure pathways
- ❑ how many people might be exposed—particularly how many older persons and children
- ❑ other government agencies you have contacted or which have investigated already

## WHAT HAPPENS AFTER ATSDR GETS MY PETITION?

When ATSDR receives a petition, a team of environmental scientists, physicians, toxicologists, and other staff members is assigned to work on it. This team begins to gather information about the site. Team members visit the site to see it firsthand and to talk with the community. After that, the team evaluates all site information and presents the results to the ATSDR petition committee. That committee decides whether ATSDR will perform a Public Health Assessment or if some other action—such as a Public Health Advisory or Health Consultation or community environmental health education—would better meet the community's needs, or if no action is needed. Petitioners are informed in writing of ATSDR's decision and the reasons for it.

*Fact sheets are available on Public Health Advisories, Health Consultations, and other ATSDR activities. If you want to know more about ATSDR, or if you have health concerns about a site or information to share about ways people might have been or might now be exposed to hazardous substances, please contact the ATSDR Community Involvement Team, visit the ATSDR web site, or call the ATSDR toll-free information line.*

Community Involvement Team  
ATSDR - Division of Health Assessment and Consultation  
1600 Clifton Road, NE (E56)  
Atlanta, Georgia 30333

ATSDR web site at <http://atsdr1.atsdr.cdc.gov:8080/>

ATSDR information line (888) 42-ATSDR, that's (888) 422-8737